

# Editing during COVID-19: one year later

The past year has been long and challenging for all of us. Here's how *Nature Methods* has been faring since COVID-19 was declared a pandemic.

A little more than a year ago, our editorial team was following the news with growing concern: a deadly respiratory virus was making its way around the world. We watched with fear and disbelief as our team members in Shanghai were told that it was not safe to return to the office following Lunar New Year. And then suddenly, the virus was upon those of us in New York City: offices closed, schools were shut down, and the normally bustling streets went eerily quiet except for the wail of ambulance sirens.

Fast forward a year: across the globe at the time of writing, more than 125,000,000 COVID-19 cases have been reported, including an astounding 2,750,000 deaths. Whether or not one has personally come face to face with the devastating effects of the virus, there are very few who have been untouched by the virus's impact in some way. All of us are looking forward to life returning to some semblance of normalcy.

The abrupt closure of our offices last winter, the cancellation of scientific conferences and planned visits with labs, and the impacts of the pandemic on our authors and reviewers necessitated changes in the way we normally work as an editorial team. Here is a backstage look at how *Nature Methods* has been faring during COVID-19.

## Submissions and peer review

At the beginning of the pandemic, we worried whether lab closures would cause manuscript submissions to slow to a trickle. Instead, we saw the opposite: for a period of about six months, our submissions were actually 30–40% higher than usual, before returning again to typical levels. We received many strong proposals for Reviews and Perspectives, some of which we have already published. Lab closures seemingly had the effect of providing some normally busy researchers the time to write papers that they had been putting on the back burner.

However, work in some labs has been affected by the pandemic much more than in others. In some locales, disruptions to work have been minimal; in others, social distancing restrictions have been severe. Researchers embarking on benchtop experiments have suffered worse disruption than those who could readily continue analyzing data or writing code from home. Many researchers serving as caregivers



Credit: smartboy10

to young children or older relatives have found their lives thrown into disarray. And of course, the virus itself has infected many of our authors and reviewers. It broke our hearts when one day we learned that a scientist who had agreed to peer-review a manuscript only weeks before had just passed away from COVID-19.

Unfortunately, the unequal disruptions to researchers' work may have effects that last for years to come. We hope we can do our part as editors to help right these inequalities, which have disproportionately impacted female scientists and those with young children. Throughout the past year, we have accommodated authors and reviewers impacted by the pandemic—ranging from discussing whether certain experiments are absolutely essential to perform for a revision, to promising 'scoop protection', to allowing more time for submitting a review.

Our temporarily increased workloads also prompted us take stock of our editorial processes, helping us improve our efficiency of manuscript handling and motivating us to further hone our editorial standards. We

are so pleased and grateful that, despite the many challenges the past year wrought for us, our authors and our reviewers, we have continued to be able to publish exciting, cutting-edge, and high-quality manuscripts.

## Journal priorities

Throughout the pandemic, we have received many submissions describing COVID-19 diagnostic methods or epidemiological approaches, which are needed, but we consider these approaches to be out of scope for *Nature Methods*. The pandemic has not altered our journal's focus on methods, tools and resources for basic research in the life sciences. In fact, COVID-19 has heightened the scientific and societal importance of basic biological research and the technologies that propel this work forward. We therefore renew our commitment to providing a forum to curate and disseminate these crucial developments. The speed with which SARS-CoV2 genomes have been sequenced, the swiftness with which virus structures have been solved at atomic resolution, and the velocity with which vaccines have been made could not have

been achieved without a strong foundation of basic research.

The pandemic has highlighted to us particular areas of biological research where a strengthened basic research foundation will be crucial for supporting applied studies on human health—fields such as immunology, microbiology and glycobiology—as well as the need for better model systems to study both normal biological function and disease. We look forward to supporting more basic research in these areas through the papers we publish and the scientists whose work we highlight in our news content. We hope that governments and funders will also recognize the importance of financially supporting basic research and especially technology development in making preparations to quell the next would-be pandemic.

### Outreach

Outreach and networking with the methods development community is a crucial aspect of our roles as editors, and the one that has been most impacted by the pandemic.

Although we have not been able to attend in-person scientific conferences in more than a year, we have been attending many meetings virtually. Virtual conferences have many benefits: they enable gatherings of more diverse groups of attendees, they make it less intimidating for young researchers to participate in discussions, and they allow us to collectively reduce our carbon footprints. We applaud the creative ways conference organizers are devising to facilitate virtual connections between scientists. But there are drawbacks: the loss of the in-person

networking component, the time zone tangles, and the inability to feel truly immersed in a meeting—which is especially challenging to address when a main purpose of a conference is to bring scientists from disparate communities together.

On the other hand, video chatting has become the new norm—it's so much nicer than a phone call!—and we welcome opportunities to [interact with scientists](#) using this medium. This past year we have 'traveled' virtually to labs all over the world. We've given many virtual talks—which take only a few hours of time, versus what would normally be a one- or two-day trip—about our journal, publishing, and editorial careers. Video chatting has allowed us to connect with a much more diverse array of researchers than our physical travel budget and time constraints could ever allow, and we definitely plan to keep this up even after the pandemic is over.

We also have increased our use of Twitter (follow us [@naturemethods](#)) as a tool to connect with the broader scientific community. Many of us on the team spend time interacting with our research communities via our personal Twitter or WeChat accounts.

We also want to hear from you. We invite our readers to share your own stories of how you have coped with the impacts of COVID-19 and whether your work has changed as a result, via the [Springer Nature Protocols and Methods Community](#).

### Summing up

The past year has been tough on our team. But we are grateful to have had our work to

keep us going throughout all the bad news and uncertainty. Since editing is largely a desk job, the transition to working from home has been relatively seamless. With the help of video and online chatting tools, we have further strengthened the bond of our journal team. In March 2020 we even welcomed and trained our newest member, Madhura Mukhopadhyay, who has never actually worked in the office! While we definitely miss seeing our colleagues in person, working from home has allowed us more personal flexibility with our time (and given us new-found affection for holding meetings in sweatpants and T-shirts!).

As we round the corner of April, hope is on the horizon. Vaccines are being rapidly distributed in many places, and infection rates are trending downward across the globe. We look forward to returning to our pre-pandemic lives, armed with new coping skills that will help us quickly pivot and thrive in the face of the next challenge—a sentiment we hope our readers share.

We would like to extend a huge thank-you to our authors for writing and revising (and for being patient when the review process took a bit longer than normal), to our reviewers for their important work of reviewing papers, to the scientists who welcomed us virtually into their labs and made themselves available for journalistic interviews, and to our readers for reading. Be well and stay safe! □

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